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## From Gaze to Witness: Masculinity and Loss in George Shaw's Paintings of Tile Hill

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*This paper explores the gaze as witness in George Shaw's painting of Tile Hill. Considering Shaw's process of making in the series 'Scenes of the Passion' (1990-2017) the paper addresses the relationship of site, memory and gaze in a negotiation of masculinity and loss in these images.*

**"Life is no way to treat an animal, not even a mouse."**

— Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without A Country*



(Fig.1.) George Shaw. *Scenes from the Passion: Ten Shilling Wood*. 2002, Private Collection, London.

The theory of the gaze has been indelibly changed by the rise of surveillance technologies and new media. As John Ellis states, 'the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the century of witness' (9). This has created a perceptual shift in the gaze's established dynamic of gendered looking and masculine mastery, as theorized by Laura Mulvey. In particular, the analogue photograph, especially within art practice, has seen its role prioritized to that of confirming evidence due to its inherent ability to mechanically record trace. In 1997, Ralph Rugoff pursued this idea in relation to the art object in his exhibition *The Scene of the Crime*, establishing a new 'Forensic Aesthetic' (17) that placed the photograph in the role of key witness. By situating the viewer as a kind of detective seeking to piece together a coherent narrative from traces left behind, this new kind of gaze transformed the process of looking from one of aesthetic contemplation to one of scrutiny and interpretation, that oddly becomes both passive and active. On the one hand the viewer passively consumes the 'evidence' mutely recorded by the camera but, on the other hand, there is a demand for active viewer engagement and collusion through that scrutiny and the impetus for interpretation.

This paper explores the utilization of the witness gaze in George Shaw's use of the photograph in the development of his paintings of Tile Hill, Coventry (1990-2017). More particularly, the paper

considers the implications of this gaze for Shaw's framing of this site at a particular moment in time, the 1970s and 80s. The research suggests that this gaze elucidates a specific history in relation to masculinity and its construction through the particular modes of labour associated with Tile Hill. More pertinently, the moment reflected on in this period of Shaw's work shadows the gradual demise of this form of labour disrupting the model of masculinity attached to it. The widespread dismantling of the UK's manufacturing industry - as robotic and service industry started to take hold towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – indeed demanded a re-negotiation of concepts of work and how they signify. The blurring of traditionally gendered distinctions of labour, which identified very physical work with masculinity and office-based work with women, had therefore to be re-thought. A perhaps largely unconscious absorbing of this conflict could be seen to inform Shaw's re-visioning of Tile Hill, as he starts to make this work in the late 1990s, and in the process of making, seeks to situate both himself and us in relation to it. A position that appears to utilize a gaze of evidence, scrutiny, and ultimately loss rather than one of active ownership and control as a given model of masculinity, falls away.

The work of George Shaw languishes in the spaces of Tile Hill, Coventry, West Midlands - the estate where he grew up in, and the place that forms the totality of his practice. His sustained engagement and reflection on this place is frequently framed in terms of recent debates around the 'everyday,' in that theory's particular concentration on the 'banal' and 'overlooked' that is also the focus of Shaw's work – i.e. the backs of garages, the path behind the shop, the generic municipal housing. The 'everyday,' as discussed by Ben Highmore (5), is a mode of perception that is largely understood as a product of capitalism. It is indeed the outcome of the temporal structure of the working day, habits, and routine that become its residue. This therefore already places us in a particular perceptual mode of looking.

Tile Hill was built for British Leyland car factory workers in the 1950s. It is where Shaw's father worked, as well as where the family lived. Tile Hill is itself therefore imbued with the notion of a particular type of labour and its temporalities - linked to a working day rhythm of 9 to 5. This is before the introduction of flexi time. It is synonymous with the apex of English manufacture and heavy industry in the West Midlands, which in the 1970s and 80s still required some direct manual labour. This was a mode of work that was seen to shape and reinforce a construction of masculinity centered on muscular development and physical risk-taking. Tile Hill also reflects a particularly English vision of suburbia, as described by Roger Silverstone (5): a contained community constructed on the one hand to create a clear demarcation between work and leisure, private and public, but in that distinction being forever ironically coupled with labour itself.

This article posits that the framing of Shaw's gaze on Tile Hill reflects his response to shifts in this mode of labour and its ultimate demise alongside the attendant identity associated with it as he witnesses, and can only witness, its transformation. Shaw's process of 'making' further identifies a journey of negotiation, that could be seen as just such a response to this loss. The paper will pursue this possibility through consideration and application of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical model of seeing and identity in the specular image, and Roland Barthes' theoretical position on the still photograph as witness, in his text *Camera Lucida* (1980). This is with a view to establishing Shaw's negotiation around masculinity and its loss through a dynamic of memory, and a particular utilization of the photograph and its witness gaze.

### **Subsuming the Photograph: Trace, Gaze and Witness**

Shaw's process of 'making' can be identified as one of persistent deferral. Walking around the estate at Tile Hill, he takes numerous snap shots of the site of which only one or two survive and are later developed into paintings due to their trigger to memory or mood. These photos are then made into drawings that are traced onto MDF and blocked in with model makers Humbrol paint. Through this process, the original photograph continually recedes as it is subsumed within the painting, resulting in a kind of mining of the self, as layers of the past envelop and reconfigure the present and the idea of a 'self' becomes obfuscated. The initial referent - the photograph - is not only transformed through paint but the duration of 'making' mediates its register to memory. The final image therefore collapses several temporalities, creating a model of oscillation and stasis, as it holds in tension - and moves across - both past and present. The paper will argue for this as a process of rehabilitation of Shaw's adolescent experience of Tile Hill in the 1970s/80 to his understanding of self in the 2000s, when he starts to make this work.

In the context of the 1970s/80s, and the specifics of the history of the site of Tile Hill that the work focuses on, this deferral contains interesting implications. Shaw's initial motivation for making these images was stimulated by returning home after a period away studying. The lack of coincidence between his memory of Tile Hill and the place he encountered on his return sent him on a mission of preservation. Taking photographs where the discord between memory and reality was at its height, Shaw was almost seeking to stop time, resurrecting his memories and mapping them onto the place that remained before such memories could be completely erased. This painting process appears therefore, on a fundamental level, to seek to remake Tile Hill, and to defer it in relation to a particular construction of Shaw's past. Through this construction of the paintings' gaze, we are made to witness that past: as witnesses, we collude in the images' construction of that past by 'passively' seeing it, identifying the evidence and in doing so, conceding to its persistence.

### **The Painted Photograph and its Residue in Contemporary Art Practice**

This process of subsuming the photograph in the painted image is potentially the key to identifying the particular relationship that Shaw is constructing with his past and, in turn, the wider implications of the witness gaze in informing that construction. This process in relation to working with photographs is not unique to Shaw, but Shaw deals with it in a specific way. The following comparison to other painters' use of the photograph clarifies Shaw's particular position in this regard.

Translating the photographic image into paint has been a dominant trend in American and European art in the last ten years, as evidenced in key exhibitions such as Ralph Rugoff's, *The Painting of Modern Life*, Hayward, London (2007). The motivations for this concern are multiple and Shaw's position in relation to it is particular. The title of the Hayward exhibition refers to Charles Baudelaire's 1863 essay of the same name, in which he encouraged painters to draw inspiration from the world around them and to reflect the qualities of modern life in both composition and subject. Rugoff sees the same impetus in the adaption of photography in contemporary art practice (11-12). Painting's dialogue with photography reflects the medium's dominance as the prime recorder of contemporary life, with painting allowing reflection on the constant making and reading of images as part of a daily encounter.

This dialogue becomes a way of interrogating the limits of representation and most particularly the limit of painting itself.

The painting refuses what the photograph cannot, as it loosens specificity. Photography's specificity is utilised to reflect on and question the nature of reality itself. Ultimately, painting conveys a lack of certainty in the face of it. For artist Luc Tuymans, for example, painting not only refuses the particularity of reality, yet it is felt to be incapable of carrying anything that corresponds to the experience of the contemporary world. The muted palette, the limited pictorial information, and the tenuous brushwork that characterise all of Tuymans' work, result in what Martin Herbert describes as 'the sense of tottering insubstantiality' to arrive at an admission of 'cultural defeat' (22).

Shaw's work is not part of this same dynamic, for the flat surface of his works is the result of the use of Humbrol paints and not an attempt, as Gerhard Richter says, of his own photography based work 'to (not) imitate a photograph ... but to make one' (Rugoff, *Painting of Modern Life*, 59). Richter's work creates a dialogue between the painted and the photographic image that plays with ideas of non-hierarchical composition, as well as a unique conflation of flatness and illusion that holds in tension the two pictorial registers. Shaw's work does not engage with the original photograph in that way. In fact, his images seem to reference the screen of analogue TV or the cinema. In the early series of 'Scenes from the Passion,' works such as the *Blossomist Blossom* 2001 (Fig.2.) are consistently pre-digital screen sized at 43x53cms - their reflective surface bouncing light like a 1980s television set.



(Fig.2.) George Shaw. *Scenes from the Passion: The Blossomist Blossom*. 2001, British Council Collection, London.

Shaw's use of the photograph therefore points not to a struggle with painting, like for Richter and Tuymans, but more to a struggle with accessing a particular memory identified by the reference to analogue TV and with finding a way to 'frame' that. Rather than being a wider comment on issues of representation, Shaw's burying of the photograph in paint, and its recreation with period-referencing Humbrol paint, creates a deferral in the work of the experience of the present in order to resist a loss of the past. This creates an almost archaeological investigation of self: the work requires us to retreat from

the present, when the photograph was taken, into a journey back - and re-construction of - Shaw's past which we bear witness to along with Shaw

### **A Dynamic of Looking: The Negotiation of Loss and the Identification with Tile Hill**

The association of the photograph with witness trauma, distance, and repression is most clearly mobilised by Roland Barthes in his work *Camera Lucida* (1980). The book is a consideration of the 'effect' of photography on the spectator and seeks to elucidate the particular quality of the photographic image. Barthes pursues this concern through a discussion of a photograph that he discovers of his recently deceased mother as a child, imbuing his thinking about photography with a haunting sense of absence and presence. This is most clearly articulated in Barthes' often-repeated statement of how the photograph:

establishes not a consciousness of the being there of the thing, (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its having-been-there. What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there then (77).

The realisation of the particular temporal play of photographs, in that they conjure the past and intrude on the present, was further linked to loss for Barthes, in his realisation that they were also inherently linked to the future, i.e. to the continual march of time, in their role as witness. Looking at a photograph of 1855 of Lewis Payne, who was about to be hanged, he saw a conflation of 'this will be' and 'this has been' (77) in the photograph. Viewing the image in 1979, Payne is long dead but, in the photograph, he is still yet to die. In this way, for Barthes, every photograph signals the imminence of death in its pointing to the passing of time for every spectator who is witness to it (Batchen 13).

Barthes therefore identifies all photographs as inherently traumatic, for they all contain the trace of a lost past and the implication of mortality. Moreover, Barthes identifies this as also acting – metaphorically – as much on the body as on the mind. This is a process he describes most directly in his distinction between the photograph's 'studium' and the 'punctum':

Studium ...an application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. ...Punctum is also sting, speck, cut, little hole-and also a cast of the dice. A photographer's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me) (27).

In this way the effect of the image is brought back, if symbolically, directly to the physical body and in turn a sense of self, creating a symbiotic relationship between body and image in this aesthetic response. This engenders a physicality that resonates with the possibility of the aforementioned violence that Barthes identifies as inherent to the photograph, and with which this section opens. In subsuming the photograph, the research suggests that Shaw's work looks to resist this violence of the image and the confrontation of loss encapsulated in its specificity. In doing so, Shaw's work therefore engages in a process of making permanent the moment that it points to, whilst seeking to defer indefinitely its loss.

In re-visioning Tile Hill, Shaw's paintings literally re-create it in terms of a particular construct of self. The way the paintings are made encourages a universal duration rather than the more temporary specificity of the photograph. Shaw's concern to achieve this duration is seen in the fact that he was prompted to make the images after returning to Tile Hill from a period away studying. However, he was

not interested in painting Tile Hill as it then was, yet he was concerned with the discordance between his memory of it and its current identity. The gap between remembrance and actuality became the core of his work. Memory, or a perception of Tile Hill, is mapped across the estate as it becomes the site of this construction of identity as the subsumed photograph buries the present. The immediacy of the photograph is lost and, with it, the present moment that makes evident the absence of a particular sense of self that is embedded in Shaw's past, and located in Shaw's memory of Tile Hill in the 1970s and 80s. This past unconsciously connects to masculine centred modes of labour and their loss. A labour central to Tile Hill. Under Margaret Thatcher's premiership this mode of labour began to erode and Thatcher's curtailing of union power also undermined the comradeship of the male workplace that the unions instilled. This is a process that therefore delivers a double loss in regard to the construction of masculinity attached to these roles. Shaw's methodology continually defers the experience of the present to resist the loss of this past. Erasing, as he does, any direct depiction of himself in the final painted image, he therefore enhances the ability of the work to equate to memory. The lack of specific personal references indeed augments the transformation of the image into the more universal medium of paint. This universality allows the image to recede even further from the present moment, by extending its connection to the past. If Shaw chose to depict his physical self in the work and retained more fully the connection to the photographic as opposed to the painted image, the work would read with the violent specificity of the photograph identified and discussed by Barthes. By transferring his identity to that of place - at a particular moment - and the photograph to paint, Shaw defers the loss that Barthes feels the photograph is felt to embody by transplanting it instead for a kind of certainty via the hard won, labour intensive surface of the painted image into which the photograph has become subsumed. This manner of working over of the image distances Barthes' original trauma of the photograph, while the retained traces of the photograph in the image - its photorealist style for example - maintains the 'punctum', the link to what 'bruises me, is poignant to me' (27). Hence, a very visceral connection to self remains but one that resides in a constant condition of desire, continuing to provide a constant possibility of becoming due to the duration of painted form rather than the closure of the photographic. This duration, combined with the photographic, also maintains us as witness. For example, in *Ten Shilling Wood* (2002) (Fig.1.), we are positioned directly in Shaw's footsteps, following his line of vision through the camera's viewfinder. The trace of the photographic remains in that composition, and also in the photo-realist style of the painting, which suggests a direct replication of place in terms of typography. However, the blush sky, the lack of specific identifying features, road signs, people, even litter, create a more universal feel which allows slippage between Shaw's memories and our own. The moment to which the work points seems confirmed by the use of Humbrol paint. Humbrol not only takes us back to teenage boys and the painting of Airfix models in the 1970s and 80s, but it also resonates with manufacture and Tile Hill's car factory hey-day. Most directly, the surface of Shaw's work that results from the use of this paint is labour intensive and hard-won. This seems to read as the last trace of labour associated with Tile Hill, which is now only visible through reference to a teenage boy's hobby located in Shaw's use of Humbrol paint and its association with Airfix model making. In turn, through that association, labour is now reduced to craft as opposed to the actual industrial manufacture that the paint and the models now stand in for. The passivity of the witness gaze seems to acknowledge this loss in images where it appears labour can now only be acted out on the surface of the painting.



In paint, this desire for a return to the past of Tile Hill is never foreclosed, as it can maintain a sense of universal persistence through the duration of paint. This is unlike a photograph, which identifies the depicted self and the moment associated with it as permanently lost once the shutter is closed, and the subject is frozen in time. As already identified, it is in this way that Barthes identifies the photograph directly in relation to death and absence. Shaw of course remains present in the work as the taker of the photograph, but his physical absence/presence in the image just underlines this potent trajectory of the photograph as understood by Barthes. Shaw's absent presence is perhaps the only way that the work can allow him to exist within these images as they oscillate between past and present and negotiate a sense of identity in the face of masculinity's loss as the work seeks to rehabilitate the past to the present.

Shaw's identification with the estate as self, and his works' continued negotiation of that self as a product of his working process, bears interesting analysis in relation to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical concept of the Mirror Stage. This further locks a reading of these images into an archaeology of self and a resistance to loss, in this paper framed as the loss of a mode of masculinity. Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' - the projection and maintenance of an ideal - also takes us to a mode of looking as part of the resistance to that loss. Lacan's 'mirror stage' is linked to a point of self-development where the child, for the first time, recognises itself as other as it sees its own reflection in the mirror. From this point the child identifies itself as separate from its world and its mother, and experiences a sense of plenitude and fullness in the complete 'I' it sees reflected. For Lacan, however, this reflection of completeness is a misrecognition, which sends the child forever searching for, or looking to construct, that completeness and issues in a process of projection as it tries to get itself and its image to cohere. (1-9) As Lacan states, the 'mirror stage' situates the ego 'before its social determination in a fictional direction...he must resolve as 'I' his discordance with his own reality' (9).

Shaw's working process, and total identification with the one continuous project of Tile Hill, feels as though it echoes the trajectory of the 'mirror stage' - with Tile Hill becoming Shaw's specular image and point of self-identification. Shaw's desire to paint Tile Hill in a particular way seems indeed to echo that constant search for self that Lacan identifies as part of that process. Shaw returns himself, and by proxy us, to his past and to a particular point of self-identity, which is forever linked with this site. This resonates with the way that Shaw selects the photographs for the paintings: he picks the ones that cohere least to memory, and reworks them until they do, or until they evoke a particular state of being, echoing Lacan's ideal 'mirror self'. In transforming the photograph from the lack of the present to the ideal of his past, the work appears to parallel the dynamic of seeking and confirming the specular image to attain the sense of completeness that Lacan identifies as that witnessed in the mirror. The translation of the photograph into paint echoes the sense of fullness of Lacan's specular image, as it recreates an ideal for Shaw - one irretrievably lodged with the particular construction of masculinity associated with Tile Hill. The labour-intensive surface seems to make evident Lacan's idea of a fight for fullness as well as reinstating the ideal of labour already discussed. If these images of Tile Hill retained more of the photographic, they could only continue to signify loss, rather than fullness, if we follow Lacan's thinking. It is in order to ameliorate that sense of loss that Shaw is attempting to negotiate or cohere it with his present sense of self, through the choices around 'making' that he initiates in relation to the images.

The translation of the photograph, aside from process, seems to involve several key tropes as part of making these images coherent in the above terms. These include the erasure of specific road or pub signs as previously mentioned. *Bus Stop at the Top*, 2003 (Fig.3.), for example, is identified purely through its location in the middle of the estate, and *The New Star*, 2002 (Fig.4.) only in its image title not its pub sign. This removal of specifics facilitates a more universal 'punctum' - the memory slippage previously indicated. This erasure allows for multiple recognition, but the scanning gaze that composes these centred images takes us back again directly to Shaw's own perceptual position. This acknowledges Shaw's inferred presence in the work and reinforces our position as witness.



(Fig.3.) George Shaw *Scenes of the Passion: Bus Stop at the Top*. 2003, Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London.



(Fig.4.) George Shaw *Scenes of the Passion: The New Star*. 2002, Private Collection.

This idea of witness is identified by Barthes as one of the particular qualities of the analogue photograph with its specific link to the indexical:

I call 'photographic referent' not the optionally real thing to which an image or sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph...In photography I can never deny that the thing has been there (76).

In this, Barthes suggests the unique role of witness that the camera plays, and also the way the photograph itself confirms a reality. Jonathan Friday identifies a further signifying position for the photograph: 'The indexicality of photographic representation forever links the image with a particular cause, and this remains impervious to time as long as the sign survives' (50). Therefore, the photograph as object continues to exist and its subject signifies in relation to the contexts in which it is placed, despite the 'death' of the shutter, and for as long as the subject persists. Friday's assertion, 'as long as the sign survives,' becomes important to what he identifies as the 'stop, start' (50) of the photograph, and the stillness within in it as being not the arrest that Barthes describes but more a moment of origination as the photograph persists in the world. Rather than an end, this is the beginning of something, the material and temporal existence of the photograph. It is this 'unchanging condition', which the photograph so clearly underlines as Friday states, that 'strikes us with this stillness, distracting us from our now and making present and unchangeable a connection with the past' (50) which is so essential to Shaw's work. Having their origin in photographic stills, Shaw's works inherently point to that desire to connect with a past and make that past unchangeable, but the work also looks to allow that past to persist in the ways that Friday identifies that might be possible. This, as we have seen, is partly achieved through the photorealist style, the composition, and subject matter of the work that maintain a dialogue with the photograph rather than completely denying it. The images cannot remain as photographs, however, not just because of Barthes 'violence' and 'stop' of the image but also because of what Friday describes as the photograph's temporal limit of existence in relation to the sign that it represents. Again, he refers to Barthes to clarify this point:

What is it that will be done away with, along with this photograph which yellows, fades, and will some day be thrown out, if not by me...when I die?...for once I am gone no one will any longer be able to testify to this: nothing will remain but an indifferent Nature. This is laceration so intense, so intolerable (94).

The photograph itself has further limitations even beyond its indexicality. Eventually, it will also move beyond recognition as those who are witness to it, and for whom it is legible, die. Painting the photograph therefore creates a duration that resists even this limitation, while the trace of the photograph taps into the 'reality' of a witness position and Barthes inability 'to deny that the thing has been there' (76).

The witness gaze of Shaw's images gives testimony to that vision. It also asks us to believe in his vision of its past, and the elements of it he seeks to have persist. It looks to doubly confirm both visions as 'real' or important to a reading of the works, that being Tile Hill as it was and the awareness of its demise. But this witness position, in opposition to established theories around the gaze, remains passive. It demands that we see what Shaw wants us to see, but in its passivity intimates a lack of control in relation to that vision. The photograph as 'evidence' can endow some kind of certainty, hence this research suggests its use but, rather than mastery, this gaze and this certainty is ultimately about the loss of that which Shaw is struggling to preserve in these images. Witness and evidence, as demonstrated, can only reflect something that has already happened: it is outside the power relations and ownership of Mulvey's gaze. Through the key mode of contemplation that the witness position enables, that loads every element of the work, no matter how banal, with heightened significance, Shaw

also situates us as players in this stage set with him. We are now forever scrutinising the enduring physicality of Tile Hill that he has produced seeking evidence for that which is now lost

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